Lincoln--Douglas Debates

By John Dickinson Sherman

Abraham Lincoln — Sen. Stephen A. Douglas

AMONG the momentous events of all nations, all ages and all history stand the Lincoln-Douglas debates. And pre-eminent in those debates are this question asked by Abraham Lincoln and this answer made by Stephen A. Douglas, August 27, 1858, at Freeport, Ill.

Question.—Can the people of a United States territory, in any lawful way, against the wish of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of a state constitution?

Answer.—It matters not what way the Supreme court may hereafter decide as to the abstract question whether slavery may or may not go into a territory under the constitution, the people have the lawful means to introduce it or exclude it as they please, for the reason that slavery cannot exist a day or an hour anywhere, unless it is supported by local police regulations. Those police regulations can only be established by the local legislature; and if the people are opposed to slavery, they will elect representatives to that body who will by unfriendly legislation effectually prevent the introduction of it into their midst. If, on the contrary, they are for it, their legislation will favor its extension. Hence, no matter what the decision of the Supreme court may be on that abstract question, still the right of the people to make a Slave Territory or a Free Territory is perfect and complete under the Nebraska bill.

These Lincoln-Douglas debates—sometimes they are called the "Freeport Debates" because of the momentous results of the foregoing question and answer—are unique in our history. Never before or since have two citizens engaged in a series of public discussions under such remarkable circumstances. While the nominal issue was the election of members of the Illinois state legislature, which was to fill the United States senatorship, for which the two debaters were candidates, the real issue was one so tremendous in importance that it was destined within a few years to plunge the country into the greatest civil war of all history. So Lincoln did not exaggerate when at Quincy, with the prophet's vision, he spoke of the seven debates as "successive acts of a drama to be enacted not merely in the face of audiences like this, but in the face of the nation and to some extent of the face of the world."

To be sure, the two men were old-time rivals. They had competed in the courts, for the hand of the same maiden and for political favors. Douglas had become nationally famous; Lincoln was a local celebrity. Douglas was the leader of a great national party; Lincoln was an organizer of a new and untried party. Douglas was the aggressive creator of the policy of "popular sovereignty," pretending to be indifferent "whether the people voted slavery up or voted it down." Lincoln was the earnest defender of the proposition that "all men are created free and equal." And this time it was a contest between them for the United States senatorship from Illinois.

But Lincoln knew—whether or not Douglas realized the situation—that the contest between them involved more than election to the senate. This is made clear in his speech of acceptance of the nomination made by the Republican state convention the preceding June. Here are his immortal words, which sounded the keynote of the whole momentous issue which was confronting the nation:

"If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do now, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government can not endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is the course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new, north as well as south."

And Illinois knew that this was more than a personal and local contest between two political rivals. Ottawa, aided by the rest of the state, started off the debates in a blaze of glory. Rival processions, the roar of cannon, a city decked with flags and an enormous crowd marked the occasion. Each of the debates attracted the same great crowds. Neither party spared pains or expense. Delegations marched in from every crossroads within fifty miles. Many of these processions were a mile long. In the main parades were floats bearing young women representing the states of the Union; among the Republican beauties was usually one in mourning—Kansas—and over the Democratic maidens floated a banner with the inscription, "Protect Us From Negro Husbands."

Finally they all assembled before the grandstand; seats could be provided for comparatively few, and the most of the people were standing. Democrats and Republicans were packed into a solid mass together, good-naturedly talking and chaffing each other. Upon the stage were seated prominent men of both parties. A chairman and secretary, and time keepers who had previously been agreed upon, were early in their seats, but made no effort to restrain the great crowd until after the speakers had arrived and received the deafening applause of their followers.

It was a curious sight when the contestants ascended to their places on the platform—Lincoln was so tall and Douglas so short, Lincoln so angular and Douglas so sturdy, Lincoln so spare and Douglas so compact and rotund. They alternated in opening and closing the debates—the opening speaker an hour, his competitor following with an hour and a half, and the opening speaker closing with half an hour.

And the whole country realized the importance of this local Illinois contest. It was understood that this was not so much a contest of men as of principles. From the beginning all semblance of a local personal struggle vanished. The eyes of the nation were on the two champions. Every newspaper detailed their speech and action. Every speech was published in full. Men on either side made the arguments of their champion their own. It was "Old Abe" and "The Little Giant" over again at every cross-roads. Illinois was the political and moral battle-ground of the nation.

And at Freeport Lincoln made it plain that he stood ready to sacrifice the senatorship in order to advance the anti-slavery cause. At the Ottawa debate, six days before, Douglas had asked seven questions as to Lincoln's attitude toward the various phases of slavery and its management. At Freeport Lincoln answered these seven questions frankly. He confessed his repugnance to slavery, but said he did not believe in immediate drastic action to abolish it. He opposed its extension. He declared it was the duty of congress to prohibit slavery in the territories. And then he put in turn four questions to Douglas, of which the second was the momentous question with the far-reaching results.

Lincoln put this question to Douglas against the frantic protests of his friends and political advisers. They told him it would cause his defeat and would lose him the senatorship. And Lincoln's reply was this:

"Gentlemen, I am killing larger game. If Douglas answers, he can never be president, and the battle of 1860 is worth a hundred of this."

Lincoln, as history has shown, was a 100 per cent patriot and American. It is no disparagement to add that no shrewder politician ever ran for office. To appreciate the shrewdness of this particular move a glance at previous events is necessary.

The historic "Missouri Compromise" act of 1820 prohibited slavery in the territories north of 36 degrees, thirty minutes, latitude. This was repealed and congress substituted for it Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854. This empowered the people of the territories to determine for themselves whether or not they should have slavery.

Then came the "Dred Scott decision" of the United States Supreme court in 1857. This held that congress has exceeded its authority in the passage of the Missouri Compromise act; that slaves were property, and that the owners of slaves had the right to take this property into the territories and hold it there like any other property, no matter what the wishes of the people of the territory in question. This decision was the direct opposite of the doctrine of Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska act. The decision meant that slavery could exist in Kansas, whether the Kansas people were or were not willing. Moreover, it opened the door wide for the extension of slavery to the West and North.

When Lincoln ended his single term in congress in March of 1849 he practically gave up politics and devoted himself to his law practice. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act in 1854 stirred him deeply and he was soon again making political addresses on the slavery situation. He and Douglas were quickly engaged in a forensic duel. In 1856 at the organization of the Republican party at Bloomington, Ill., Lincoln made an impressive speech, which fixed his position as leader of the anti-slavery forces in Illinois. There was civil war in Kansas and slavery was the issue of the day. In June of 1857 at Springfield, Ill., Douglas made an elaborate address on the Kansas-Nebraska act and the Dred Scott decision. Two weeks later Lincoln made a telling reply.

Thus the two great protagonists were in fighting array as the 1858 election of a successor to Senator Douglas drew near. Douglas was unopposed in his own party and the Republican state convention of June 6, 1858, nominated Lincoln.

The battle was soon in full swing. Douglas assumed the offensive and Lincoln dogged his footsteps. After each had made speeches Lincoln, with his unfailing political shrewdness, challenged Douglas to a formal debate on the questions at issue. He wanted a chance to pin the elusive Douglas down to facts. Douglas made the mistake of accepting the challenge. The terms provided that the men should meet in seven congressional districts—they had already spoken in the districts in which Chicago and Springfield were located. The meeting places and dates were: Ottawa, August 21; Freeport, August 27; Jonesboro, September 15; Charleston, September 18; Galesburg, October 7; Quincy, October 13; Alton, October 15. Douglas insisted on a schedule that gave him four openings and closings and Lincoln only three. Lincoln agreed; he wanted a chance at the Democrats, who would be sure to stay to the end of at least four of the debates.

Under these circumstances and conditions, therefore, Lincoln's question at Freeport put Douglas on the horns of an awkward dilemma. If he answered "No" he would be going back on his own doctrine of "popular sovereignty"—which his enemies called "pro-slavery" and considered his bid for Southern votes at such time as it might please him to run for president. If he said "Yes," he would place himself on record as denying the doctrine of the Dred Scott decision that slaves were property.

Lincoln's reading of the situation was that Douglas would not dare to say "No" and would choose to say "Yes." And if he denied that slaves were property and could be handled like any other property he would antagonize the slavery interests, alienate the Southern democracy and make it possible for him to achieve the presidency.

Douglas said "Yes," as Lincoln had foreseen.

In the election for senator the Republican ticket received 125,430 votes and the Democratic ticket 121,609. But by virtue of an unfair legislative apportionment the Democrats had 54 votes on joint ballot in the general assembly and the Republicans 46. So Douglas was re-elected senator.

In the presidential election of 1860 the South turned against Douglas and the Democratic party was split in two. Douglas was nominated by a faction of it. With Douglas of Illinois as the candidate of the Northern Democrats, the Republicans were compelled to nominate a candidate from Illinois. The logic of the situation forced the nomination of Lincoln.

Douglas was defeated for the presidency as Lincoln had foreseen.

Out of Lincoln's election came the Civil War.

Out of the Civil War came Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Thus Lincoln fulfilled his own prophecy:

"'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided."

And all this goes straight back to that question asked by Abraham Lincoln and answered by Stephen A. Douglas August 27, 1858, at Freeport, Ill.

VALENTINE VERSES.

By Mary Humphrey.

To a Girl He Left Behind.

Dear Girl of My Dreams, I am coming,
Back from war I am coming to you;
And I wonder what fate will be waiting for me,
And will you be glad I came through?
It's so strange. They have called me a brave man,
And they gave me a medal or two;
In the fight I feared nothing—and yet I'm afraid
Of a small brown-eyed person like you!
Do you know that I love you? I wonder.
Oh, what ages and ages it seems
Since I left you! Perhaps it's absurd, but I hope
That I've been the Man of Your Dreams.

To His Fairy.

If I just dared to say it,
You sure can bet I would
Right up and tell you what I feel—
Gee, but I wish I could!
Oh, kiddo, you're so classy,
With those big eyes of blue,
You've got the others beat a mile—
There sure ain't none like you.
No chance for me—I know it,
I'm such a roughneck guy—
But if I thought you'd look at me,
Oh, Boy! I'd make the try.
Believe me, you're some fairy,
You're better'n I deserve;
I'd send a Valentine—but gee,
I just ain't got the nerve!

A Substitute.

A Valentine I've tried to find
That's nice enough for you;
But there is none—so here's my heart,
I hope that it will do.

To His Mother.

Today an old sweetheart of mine
Is my most precious Valentine;
My best and oldest sweetheart you
Are, mother dear. So loyal, true
And tender always. And your love
I cherish over and above
Earth's fairest gifts. You've made of me
All that I am and hope to be,
Mother mine,
My Valentine.

DAY SACRED TO LOVE MISSIVES

IT WAS an enterprising young girl who first captured the valentine trade for America. Her name was Esther Howland. After graduating from Mount Holyoke seminary she resided with her father, who was a stationer in Worcester, Mass. In 1849 she received from England a manufactured valentine, the first she had ever seen. It interested her so much that she decided to see whether she could make some of these valentines and find a sale for them.

She collected some lace paper, some printed verses and sentimental pictures, fixed up a few valentines and gave them to her brother, who was a traveling salesman for a grocery store. To her amazement her brother returned with orders for $5,000 worth of valentines! Her astonishment knew no bounds. She quickly got together some girl friends, taught them what she knew about valentines and commenced a prosperous trade that was to reach the one hundred thousand dollar mark.

First Love Missives.

It was a Frenchman who first conceived the idea of composing valentines in verse. Charles, Duke of Orleans, was taken prisoner by the English at the battle of Agincourt, in 1415. He was consigned to the Tower of London, where he spent the next twenty-five years of his life. But the cold walls of his dungeon could not completely dampen his sentimental nature, and from his gloomy vault came sunny little verses to the number of sixty, which are still to be seen among the royal papers in the staid old British museum. One of them reads:

Wilt thou be mine? Dear love, reply.
Sweetly consent or else deny.
Whisper softly, none shall know—
Wilt thou be mine, love? Aye or no?

Spite of fortune we may be
Happy by one word from thee.
Life flies swiftly. Ere it go,
Wilt thou be mine, love Aye or no?

England at once adopted the fad which its royal prisoner had set, and Valentine's day found the coaches more than usually laden with poetic outpourings of lovers, friends and even slight acquaintances.

Old Romance Recalled.

One of the most romantic histories of Valentine children is that of Lady Sarah Lennox, born on February 14, 1745. In fact, she apparently inherited a romantic temperament, for her own story is usually prefaced with a sketch of her parents' romance—by way of driving home the story's admonition, perhaps.

Her father's marriage was no more nor less than a bargain to cancel a gambling debt between the couple's parents. The young duke, then Lord March, was brought home from college to wed the plain little girl-bride just out of nursery. At the conclusion of the ceremony the indignant bridegroom fled to the continent with a tutor in tow, where he spent three years. On his return to London he carefully avoided going home, where he fancied a wrathful young woman was waiting to swoon at his arrival.

Instead, he went straight to the theatre and saw there a very handsome lady. He cursed his luck, but had breath left to ask who she might be. "Lady March, the toast of the season," informed his friends, to his utter astonishment. Then he blessed his luck, claimed his bride and, as it turned out, was very happy to the end. Her love was so great, too, that she died of grief for him after a year of widowhood.

Sentiment and Business.

Samuel Pepys has something to say in his famous diary about most of joys and disturbances, great and small, with which human nature is acquainted. Consequently one does not need to search very far to find allusions to Valentine's day and the customary pranks that it involved in the England of the seventeenth century.

On February 14, 1667, the following entry is made in the diary:

"This morning came up to my wife's bedside (I being up dressing myself) little Will Mercer to be her valentine, and brought her name written upon blue paper in gold letters, done by himself, very pretty; and we were both well pleased with it. But I am also this year my wife's valentine, and it will cost me five pounds; but that I must have laid it out if we had not been valentines."

America's Noted Valentine.

America's most noted valentine was General Winfield Scott Hancock, born February 14, 1824. The witching influence of the saint's festival hovering about him manifested itself in the culmination of his romance. In her "Reminiscences," written in old age, Mrs. Hancock (who was Miss Almira Russell) tells of her strange wedding and proves that, after all, the American girl has determination to rise above superstitions.

To start with, her wedding day was one of the stormiest of the winter. It hailed violently, thundered and blew a perfect gale. During the ceremony, which was held at her father's home in St. Louis, the lights went out three times and repeated the performance at the wedding reception. The guests were filled with terror for the young bride who was beginning life under such suggestively evil omens. And by way of enhancing the evil influences that appeared to be abroad the crowd outside the house got the word that the bride was wearing a spun glass dress, and their curiosity reached the point of mob violence before the police could beat them back to make room for the passage of guests.

But the bride laughed in the face of these witches' pranks and lived to share the honors that her husband's career brought him.

St. Valentine's Mission.

When winter's at his oldest
And coldest
And boldest,
Then cometh good St. Valentine,
To show that love is burning
And sighing and yearning,
And breathe upon the wintry earth
his tenderness divine.

When life is at its bleakest
And meekest
And weakest,
Then cometh good St. Valentine,
To show that love is rosy
And wistful eyed and cosy,
And breathe on every torpid heart
his tenderness divine.